

FIRE WATCH

Jeff Hutcheson



Brittney Spears, Alan Jackson, Tiger Woods, Brett Favre, Mel Gibson. What do these people have to do with this week's column? You'll have to read clear to the end to find out.

The fire service has a long history and tradition of personal sacrifice for the sake of others. There are very few professions, paid or volunteer, where each day when a person goes to work they are aware that they run the risk of not returning home after their shift. This fact was really brought home on September 11, 2001 and has been renewed again within the last week. There have been seven firefighter fatalities within the last seven days. That is an astonishing, horrifying number. And slightly above the national average. According to Chief Ron Siarnicki, Prince George's County, MD and Executive Director of the National Fallen Firefighter's Foundation, he receives notification of a line-of-duty firefighter death every 80 hours. That fact is frightening...think about it, a little more than two times each week a firefighter dies in the performance of his or her duty, on the fire ground or responding to a fire or medical emergency. Yet, each day, thousands of firefighters report to work or await the tones from their pager to help someone in need. Let's face it, if you are waiting for the Fire Department to respond to your house you are having one of the worst days in your life. Whether it is a fire, a fall, a heart attack, a motor vehicle accident, whatever the emergency, the members of the fire service put you and your safety ahead of their own. And many of those responders are volunteers. It takes a special kind of person to accept a career in the fire service. It has often been said that a firefighter is not a "normal" person. It is against normal human nature to enter a burning building when everyone around you is running away, every nerve in your body screams "get out!" Yet, hundreds of times each and every day this is exactly what does happen. And all too often it results in the death of a rescuer. Tragic. Senseless. Devastating. It affects not only their family, but also their co-workers and even the community. It even struck close to home last month in Wood River, Nebraska when two volunteer firefighters lost their lives in a structure fire.

By now you may be asking yourself "where is he going with this?" I'm getting there. As I read this week's newspaper review of the Brittney Spears concert and many of the stories in the sports and entertainment sections, I found myself questioning who we pick as our heroes, our role models, who our children idolize and I can't help but wonder if the wrong message is being delivered. We direct our affection and devotion towards entertainers and athletes who command seven-figure salaries to do nothing more than entertain us. Yet we allow, even insist, that public servants be willing to sacrifice their lives for us for much less. And it's not just the fire service. It is law enforcement, the military and other similar occupations. As I see it, the American public has its priorities confused. Maybe the "hero worship" and the "idol-ism" of the public needs to be redirected. Move it from the entertainers and athletes whose motivation seems to be "how much money can I get?" and direct it to those who risk their lives for a fraction of what these personalities are paid. I'm not saying that we in public service should be paid megabucks to do our job, I am merely suggesting that the American public sit back and take stock of what is truly important to them, the health and safety of themselves and their families and friends. Take a minute and say "thank you" to those who do really impact you, who will be there for you when you call and who will not ask what is in it for them as they enter your burning house, extricate your family member from a crumpled vehicle, search your house or business in response to an intrusion alarm or otherwise serve as true American heroes.

As always, I appreciate your comments, questions and criticisms. I can be reached at; Council Bluffs Fire Department, 20 South 4th Street, Council Bluffs, Iowa 51503, 712-328-4671 or via e-mail at jhutcheson@cbfire.org.